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CC:
Subject: CBS News: Federal agency cancels water delivery to Pa. town

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Federal agency cancels water delivery to Pa. town

(AP) ALLENTOWN, Pa. — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency abruptly changed its mind Saturday about delivering fresh water to residents of a northeastern Pennsylvania village where residential wells were found to be tainted by a natural gas drilling operation.

Only 24 hours after promising them water, EPA officials informed residents of Dimock that a tanker truck wouldn't be coming after all. The about-face left residents furious, confused and let down — and, once again, scrambling for water for bathing, washing dishes and flushing toilets.

Agency officials would not explain why they reneged on their promise, or say whether water would be delivered at some point.

"We are actively filling information gaps and determining next steps in Dimock. We have made no decision at this time to provide water," EPA spokeswoman Betsaida Alcantara said in an email to The Associated Press.

It's not clear how many wells in the rural community of Dimock Township were affected by the drilling. The state has found that at least 18 residential water wells were polluted.

Eleven families who sued Houston-based Cabot Oil & Gas Corp. expected water from the EPA to arrive either Friday or Saturday. They say they have been without a reliable source of water since Cabot won permission from state environmental regulators to halt deliveries more than a month ago.

Cabot, which was banned in 2010 from drilling in a 9-square-mile area around the village, took legal responsibility for the Dimock methane contamination, but contends water wells in the area were already tainted with methane long before the company arrived. The company also says it met a state deadline to restore or replace Dimock's water supply, installing treatment systems in some houses that have removed the methane.

But homeowners say their wells are tainted with methane gas and toxic chemicals that are used in hydraulic fracturing, a technique in which water, sand and chemicals are blasted deep underground to free natural gas from dense rock deposits.

Dimock resident Craig Sautner said an EPA staffer in Philadelphia told him Saturday the water delivery was canceled. He said the EPA staffer, on-scene coordinator Rich Fetzner, would not explain why.

"You can't be playing with people's lives like this," said Sautner, whose well was polluted in September 2008, shortly after Cabot began drilling in the area.

Sautner and the other homeowners had been relying on deliveries of bulk water paid for by anti-drilling groups, but the last delivery was Monday, and some of them ran out.

After the EPA delivery fell through Saturday, the environmental group Water Defense, founded by actor Mark Ruffalo, said it would send a tanker from Washingtonville, N.Y., on Sunday to replenish the residents' supply.

Dimock has become a focal point in the national debate over the so-called fracking method, which has allowed energy companies to tap previously inaccessible reservoirs of natural gas while raising concerns about its possible health and environmental consequences. The industry says the technique is safe.

Gas drilling companies have flocked in recent years to the Marcellus Shale, a massive rock formation underlying New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia that's believed to hold the nation's largest deposit of natural gas. Pennsylvania has been the center of activity, with thousands of wells drilled in the past few years.

The latest twist in the three-year-old Dimock saga left residents with plenty of questions, but no answers.

"What happened? Who had the power here? Who had the power to change their minds? Was it the governor? Was it somebody from Washington? Was it Cabot? What happened? We don't know. We're really confused," said Wendy Seymour, an organic garlic farmer.

Seymour said an EPA official in Philadelphia told her Friday that she could expect a delivery. On Saturday, another EPA official called her and "apologized for the confusion" and said EPA was still assessing the situation.

Claire Sandberg, executive director of Water Defense, said the EPA owed them an explanation.

"It's tragic to see the EPA raise these people's hopes and then dash them, to see the EPA suggest they were beginning to accept their responsibility to protect the public, and then back out a few hours later when these people are so desperate," she said.